

Photographer delves deep in Portrait of a Lady



By Brock Weir

From books and magazines, to television and social media, people are bombarded with images each and every day and, although you might not realise it, these visuals go a long way in forming how you see yourself in the world.

Photographer Angela Durante Dukat is no exception.

Throughout her life, the images Ms. Durante Dukat says she grew up with formulated ideas within on what she was supposed to do with her body, how her body was supposed to move, look, and even what space it was to occupy.

These images, however, were challenged at home by a mother who refused to abide by the regular formulas, and it lit a spark in her daughter that endures to this day.

These are the very notions she explores in her photographic exhibition, *Portrait of a Lady*, on now in the Colleen Abbott Gallery at the Aurora Public Library.

Depicting women from around the Aurora community in a variety of settings, it sets out to provide an 'uplifting message' about 'and for' contemporary women.

'The idea for the project came out of my academic work; it was the research I did for my PhD around how women's bodies were being used by artists to articulate ideas about nationhood. It got me thinking about how women's bodies were being used in a political way by artists and how maybe we could use that same political rhetoric to show more uplifting messages about women and not fear-based messages about women.'

Ms. Durante Dukat focused very close to home when choosing subjects for the exhibition, approaching women she encountered in her everyday life to consider being a part of it. They are 'everyday' women but everyday women who are 'really powerful icons for other women around them.'

'Everyone I asked said yes,' says the photographer, formerly an Aurora resident, now living in Uxbridge with her husband and two children. 'The question I asked them as a starting point was, 'what do you think makes you extraordinary?' Although this was a tricky question for many women, we were able to carve out why they found themselves to be non-normative and we focused on those things. Perhaps Cynthia Balaski's portrait with her two girls is a good example.

'She said the bicycle is a way she has been able to connect with her daughters to communicate ideas about women going fast through the world. We just had to do something with the bicycles. Each portrait really does reflect the lives and passions of the women who are in the portraits. It doesn't extend outside of their own personal experience.'

It struck her, she says, how willing the women were to participate in the project when they knew it was a project focused squarely on women and girls.

'What that says to me inherently is women widely really do understand that we don't have enough iconic imagery and enough variety in the type of imagery we see of womanhood. Everyone I asked was super-enthusiastic. This isn't a problem that just I see, this is a commonly understood gender issue: how we see the world is heavily dictated by the art we put in front of ourselves.'

Art, of course, is always in the eye of the beholder and Ms. Durante Dukat contends that any form of imagery can be considered art, whether or not it is being used to one political advantage or another, those are underlying issues we need to start picking apart, but that comes later.?

?Right now, my goal is to expand a little bit on the imagery we tend to see of women. My idea is to put more of that imagery out there.?

The Colleen Abbott Gallery is situated on the top floor of the Library, just at the top of the stairs on the way to the Children's and Young Adult Sections. This is a prime opportunity to make an impression on the upcoming generation and challenge the contemporary stereotypes they encounter today.

?If they don't have a lot of time to spend with each image, I hope just passing by the group as a whole at least gives them a feeling of power that is related to womanhood,? she says. ?What I am really hoping is they can just normalize what they see because they can relate it to their daily lives. I hope there is something really normal to these photographs as well.

?There is some form of tension that makes the portrait I think interesting and one of those intersections is always gender. I think it touches upon the fact we are nowhere near done the work we need to be doing as image makers and women to continue to ameliorate the cultural environment for women so we can start to take down the boundaries that we don't see.

?What we're allowed to study, where we're allowed to go, and what we're allowed to do, those kind of political boundaries, have come down but we're still working really hard on the social and cultural boundaries that are holding us back in some really big ways. For me, imagery is one of those universal languages we can contribute to that cultural and social problem.?